

“Breaking Barriers: The Legacy of Duke Ellington”

Program notes by Steven Larsen

Hard to believe that in 1943 a debate raged as to whether jazz was “real music” or merely “a variety of folk music”. In the journal *American Mercury*, Winthrop Sargeant (who would become *The New Yorker’s* chief critic from 1947 to 1972) contended that jazz had the poetic resources of “pidgin English,” lacked any ability to affect the deeper emotions and should stay in its place in the dance hall.

Sargeant took pains to stress that jazz was “the most vital folk music of our time”, better “than anything of the sort Europe has evolved in centuries.” Finally, he comes to the crux of his argument: the freshness and ready appeal of jazz was “the fruit of ignorance.”

“Jazz appeared in the first place because the poor Southern Negro couldn’t get a regular musical education. . . . Give him the chance to study and the Negro will soon turn from boogie woogie to Beethoven.”

Kind of takes your breath away, doesn’t it? And all this time we thought that Gershwin settled the issue. Then again, Gershwin was white. In 1943 America was not only deeply segregated (even our own black soldiers fought in their own units), many of those who believed in integration held patronizing views that blacks were intellectually and/or morally inferior to whites.

Among the responses to Sargeant’s article, two stand out. Daniel Gregory Mason, a composer and educator, reprimanded Sargeant for taking popular music seriously and called jazz “the academic routine of the illiterate.” The other was from Duke Ellington, who gently but eloquently and with humor disposes of Sargeant’s argument. Sargeant had singled out the blues form as proof of jazz’ harmonic monotony. Ellington likened the restrictions of the blues form to the sonnet in poetry, noting that poetry has somehow managed to maintain its interest. And rather than rise up in outrage at the prediction that education will lead the Negro to Beethoven, Ellington wryly allows the possibility: “Maybe so, but what a shame!”

There he was at his best, ever the diplomat, the smooth-talking, smiling gentleman, never willing to soil himself with belligerence and spite, always presenting himself as the aristocrat who had earned his title of faux-nobility from the public. But he was not simply the champion of a musical genre; he was the world’s premier advocate for the heritage and dignity of an entire race.

The purpose of this concert is not to defend jazz; it obviously needs none. Nor is it to highlight the significance of the black musical heritage in contemporary culture. For the 20th century, black popular music in all its forms had much the same effect on the world that Richard Wagner had for the 19th; either imitation or conscious refutation.

This concert attempts, in much too small a way, to scratch the surface of the genius of Edward Kennedy Ellington. Even if he had ended his career with his band’s triumphal 1939 European tour, he would be immortal for the dozens of jazz standard classics he left us. Still, commercial success wasn’t enough. He wanted to show that jazz – the traditions he correctly believed came

to this country through the West Indies from Africa – could become serious “art music”, not simply entertainment or a means for dancing. Jazz could express big ideas, even ideas as big as the battle against racism and the quest for equality. Gershwin may have shown that jazz could become part of classical music’s vocabulary, but Ellington wanted to show that symphonic music could enrich the already expressive language of jazz.

So, this isn’t a Pops concert, where we might take pleasure (and give you some, we hope, by dressing up popular music in black tie and long dresses). This concert honors one of America’s greatest composers – and some would argue, America’s greatest composer – by presenting music not often heard in concert halls. I hope you enjoy it.

Steve Larsen

Edward Kennedy (“Duke”) Ellington (April 29, 1899 – May 24, 1974)
(from www.biography.com)

Composer, orchestra conductor, and jazz musician, born in Washington, District of Columbia, USA. Raised in a moderately well-to-do family (his father was a White House butler and later a blueprint-maker for the US Navy), he studied piano and painting from age six, and acquired his nickname from a boyhood friend. He began standing in for ragtime pianist Lester Dishman at a Washington cafe in 1914, and while there he wrote his first composition, ‘Soda Fountain Rag’. He won a poster design contest sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1917), and this prompted him to leave high school before graduation to operate his own sign-painting business, but a year later he declined a scholarship from the Pratt Institute (Brooklyn) and devoted himself exclusively to music.

He first established his name in Washington by supplying bands for parties and dances, and as a sideman in other bands. In 1923 he and hometown associates Sonny Greer and Otto Hardwick moved to New York City and began working as ‘the Washingtonians’. He assumed leadership of the ensemble, which in 1924 made its first recordings and began a three-year residency at a Broadway speakeasy. He wrote the score for the *Chocolate Kiddies* (1925), a revue that ran for two years in Germany. He also began to attract significant sidemen to his band, including such colourful, blues-oriented players as Johnny Hodges and Cootie Williams, who helped form Ellington's signature style and propel his output as a composer. The Duke Ellington Orchestra made its decisive opening at the Cotton Club (Dec 1927), the showplace of Harlem speakeasies, remaining in residency until 1932.

By this time, through radio broadcasts and many recordings for US, English, and French labels, he was internationally renowned as the foremost jazz composer and bandleader. In 1930 he performed with his orchestra in the Amos and Andy film *Check and Double Check*, the first of many such film appearances. In 1933 he led his 14-piece band on its first tour of England and Europe, and for the next 40 years he maintained a near-constant touring schedule, broken only by perennial residencies at clubs in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. During 1930–42 he was at his most creative, composing a series of pieces that highlighted the distinct musical personalities of his loyal sidemen. In 1938 he hired composer-arranger Billy Strayhorn, an essential collaborator whose 1941 composition ‘Take the “A” Train’ became the band's theme. During this period Ellington also produced several of his most enduring works, including ‘Mood Indigo’, ‘Sophisticated Lady’, ‘In a Sentimental Mood’, and ‘Don't Get Around Much

Anymore'. In 1943 he introduced his celebrated extended work, *Black, Brown, and Beige* at Carnegie Hall, where he premiered other ambitious works at annual concerts during 1948.

Throughout the early 1950s he was virtually alone among jazz orchestra leaders in keeping his band intact, though he suffered several key personnel changes and a reduction in the quality of his bookings. In 1955 Johnny Hodges rejoined the band after a four-year absence and during the next five years Ellington's popularity underwent a dramatic renewal, encouraged by a successful appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956, the recording of which became his biggest-selling album. In 1959 his soundtrack for *Anatomy of a Murder* was the first commissioned from an African-American composer for a major Hollywood film. His overseas tours in the 1960s and 1970s inspired several large-scale suites, and in his final decade he also wrote liturgical music for concerts he presented in cathedrals in the USA, England, and Germany. Increasingly recognized as a major American composer, he received numerous honorary degrees and awards after 1963, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1969). In 1971 he became the first jazz musician inducted into the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, Sweden. His autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, was published in 1973. He led his band until a couple of months before his death from cancer, when it was taken over by his son, Mercer Ellington (1919–96).

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Suite from *The River*

Mercer Ellington (Duke Ellington's son) recalled that "the idea for *The River* had been kicking around for several years, ever since Stanley Dance had suggested an extended work depicting the natural course of a river". The elder Ellington composed the music for *The River* in 1970, during the same period of time when *The New Orleans Suite* was taking shape. When Alvin Ailey asked Ellington for a new ballet score (Ailey's choreography of Ellington's *Night Creature* had been a success), Ellington gathered scores and recordings of all the "water music" he could think of: Smetana's *Die Moldau*, Debussy's *La mer*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, as well as the obvious Handel Suite. Ultimately, Ellington abandoned the idea of a descriptive tone poem and began to conceive of the piece as a "religious allegory."

With the commission in hand, Duke assigned Ron Collier to orchestrate *The River*. Collier had previously orchestrated Duke's *Celebration* for the anniversary of the Jacksonville Symphony. Collier later recalled his experience:

"I had to orchestrate from the band charts. For most of the pieces he would write them out because the choreographer needed pieces of music so that he could work with the dancers; and, instead of Duke writing out a piano piece, he would write out a chart for the band, tape the chart for the band, send it on to Alvin Ailey and that's what they would use to work with."

Except in one case, as Collier tells it.

"Anyways he gave me one piece. It was called 'Lake' and it was up in his room (I had dinner at his place.) Just a little piece of sheet music, single-line chord changes and he said, 'This is

a *pas de deux*, two dancers.’ I said, ‘What would you like me to do with it?’ He says, ‘Well, you know what to do with it.’ You know, it’s almost seven minutes long on the tape but that’s all the instructions: ‘You know what to do with it.’ So I went home and it sat on the brief case.”

Not long afterward, Collier said, he got a call from Duke that the band would be recording ‘Lake’ the next day. He said he stayed up all night to do it with fellow arranger Joe Benjamin helping with the copying, doing it for a small orchestra.

Collier was vigorously opposed to the release of a 1970 recording of *The River*. “I got a beef here,” he told an audience. “Mercer released this. I’m sure if Duke were alive, he would never have released this, for they [*The River* numbers] were really very rough and their function was not to be a commercial record. They were to be for the choreographer, not written to be band pieces or for a symphony orchestra.” Nonetheless, *The River* has been recorded several times, and imperfect or not, represents something of Ellington’s thoughts, late in his life, about music’s ability to tell a story.

Hubert Saal’s review of the premiere offers a colorful description of the ballet: “Ellington’s score is a tone poem, a suite that traces the meandering river’s course and speed from birth as a spring, through rapids, over falls, spinning into whirlpools, subsiding into lakes, passing by cities, ending in the sea. It is a musical allegory in the course of which the river from spring to sea parallels the course of life from birth to death, a cycle, according to Ellington, of ‘heavenly anticipation of rebirth.’ The music is itself like a river, constantly flowing, changing speed and shape, instantly accessible melodically. Ellington parades it all from the slow, folk-song opening ‘Spring’ through the jazzy swingtime ‘Vortex’ to the spiritual and blues of ‘Two Cities.’”

New World A-Comin’

By the end of the 1930s, Duke Ellington was on top of the world. His band’s 1939 European tour was a spectacular success. True, his U.S. tours were lucrative and made him a household name, and record deals produced a steady stream of income. But in their own country they traveled as second-class citizens, forced to use separate train cars, washrooms, restaurant counters and hotel doors designated “Colored”. In contrast, in Europe they were fêted by royalty, heads of state, aristocracy and adoring fans. Ellington’s name epitomized popular music of the day.

World War II brought dramatic changes to America’s entertainment industry. Almost overnight the profitable nightclub circuit dried up. Fuel was rationed, their private Pullman train cars had been commandeered, shellac for records was scarce, and both his band and his audience were decimated by the draft. To make matters worse, the American Federation of Musicians called a nation-wide strike on recording companies, further cutting Duke’s income. To survive, Ellington had to change with the times.

Just before the European tour a 23-year-old arranger named Billy Strayhorn joined Ellington’s band. Strayhorn ultimately penned many of the tunes associated with Ellington, including *Something to Live For*, *Take the “A” Train*, *Chelsea Bridge*, and *Satin Doll*. His influence over Ellington was immense. Strayhorn was classically trained, and it is likely that Ellington got the

idea to compose large-scale orchestra works from their association. The grandeur of the orchestra seemed the perfect vehicle for promoting the unique achievements and abilities of African American.

Seeking to find new channels for his music, Ellington booked a concert in January of 1943 at New York's Carnegie Hall. The concert was a virtual musical autobiography, and it lasted a whopping three-and-one-half hours. Leading the program was *Black, Brown and Beige*, a suite that portrays "the history of the black people in the USA through their music." The concert's success (not to mention the controversy it created) led to an encore on December 11. For that occasion Ellington premiered a new work himself as piano soloist, backed by his band. Its name, *New World A-Comin'* was borrowed from a then-popular book by Roi Ottley. Duke described the piece's meaning for his race in rather grandiose terms: "We, very optimistically, anticipated a better future" of halcyon days to come for colored people, a world of peace and good will.

Ellington's lofty description is disingenuous to the point of absurdity. *New World A-Comin'* is a series of florid piano improvisations combined with sonorous orchestral interspersions to form a kind of rhapsody. Duke had never before taken the spotlight as a soloist. Was it an attempt to show off his pianistic technique to an audience of musical sophisticates? Or was it an expediency, allowing him to fill out a chunk of time with improvisation when he had failed to finish the work in time? (Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* comes to mind)

In any case, *New World A-Comin'* stands alone in Ellington's enormous output. The Ellington scholar Mark Tucker, in his book *The Duke Ellington Reader* offers his opinion that it is "excellent music, a perfectly successful fusion of 'jazz as a form with art music'".

Les Trois Rois Noirs (The Three Black Kings)

At the time of his death, Ellington was still working on *Les Trois Rois Noirs*. With an ending by the composer's son, Mercer Ellington, the work received its American premiere on the anniversary of Duke's birthday, April 29, 1976, by the Mercer Ellington Orchestra at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. That summer, on July 7, the Alvin Ailey Company danced to the Ellington orchestra's music at Art Park, in Lewiston, New York, and brought the production to the New York State Theater on August 13, 1976, as part of an Ellington festival. Maurice Peress, the conductor who earlier adapted *Black, Brown and Beige* for symphony orchestra with Ellington's blessing and guidance, did the same for this newest triptych.

Purists criticize these orchestrations for tampering with the master's original voice. Yet it was Ellington himself who purposefully forged links between the jazz and symphonic worlds. "I don't believe in categories of any kind," he stated. After his 1943 Carnegie Hall concerts he not only sanctioned but participated in the orchestral adaptations of several of his works.

A common theme in Ellington's work is the cause of the black man. The titles speak volumes: *Black Beauty*, *Deep South Suite*, *My People*, *Liberian Suite*, *La plus belle africaine*, *Black, Brown and Beige*, and his last, unfinished work, *Les trois rois noirs* (The Three Black Kings). The kings are: Balthazar, one of the Magi, or Three Wise Men, who traditions holds was black;

King Solomon (who was half Negro, if the legend is true that his mother, Bathsheba, was black); and Martin Luther King, Jr., the martyred civil rights leader whom Ellington knew personally. *Les Trois Rois Noirs* would seem to be the Duke's final statement on black dignity and pride. Mercer Ellington contended that his father "intended it as a eulogy for Martin Luther King and he decided to go back into myth and history to include other black kings."

Mercer Ellington explanation of the meaning of *Les Trois Rois Noirs* was no doubt sincere; in all probability he received the words directly from his father. As his health failed, Ellington became more interested in spirituality and faith. The work may have germinated during a steak dinner in an African restaurant, but it grew to maturity as a noble and sincere tribute to his race.

Like Ellington's other symphonic compositions, these three movements blend traditional orchestral sounds with the jazz idiom in which Ellington spent most of his career. In this orchestration, the piece follows the traditional structure of a *concerto grosso*, in which the full ensemble counters a small group of soloists within the orchestra.

In "King of the Magi," the driving and percussive *ostinati* at the beginning recall primitivist evocations of Africa. Subsequent episodes are studies in orchestral timbres, showing Ellington's characteristic sensitivity to the tone colors of different instruments. King Solomon is next, using the sultry language of jazz to invoke visions of the Biblical king's court and the perfume of the dancing girls. Dr. King is memorialized, not with a dirge, but with a majestically rollicking Gospel tune that acknowledged the source of his power, in both the God who is worshipped through Gospel music and the millions who embrace him through it.

Grand Slam Jam

Tracing the origins of *Grand Slam Jam* is a difficult task, made trickier by the fact that – well, it's not what anyone would call a masterpiece. Most scholars have given it short shrift, and orchestras aren't usually interested in recording a work that is basically a vehicle for jazz improvisation. Still, one must emphasize that Ellington never intended this slight work to be a profound masterpiece. 'Fun' is the watchword here, as two worlds – jazz soloists and symphony orchestra – once separated by an enormous abyss, come together to celebrate a common language.

In a book of music called *Boogie Bop Blue* (1947) Duke included a jamming tune intended to allow his band to take as many choruses for improvisation as "felt good" at the time. When the Philadelphia Orchestra invited him to play at a Robin Hood Dell concert in 1949, Ellington asked Luther Henderson to prepare a symphonic version of this tune that would allow key members of his band to "jam" with the orchestra. He slyly called it *Non-Violent Integration* (the Philadelphia Orchestra was 100% white at the time).

Years later – possibly in 1975, when Mercer Ellington registered the copyright – Hendrickson re-scored the work, changing the title to *Grand Slam Jam*, with choruses for both the symphony orchestra and the jazz soloists. Maurice Peress brought that version to the publisher G. Schirmer, editing it to make it useable for any combination of jazz soloists.

Selections from Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker", in their original version and as arranged by Duke Ellington

Las Vegas hardly conjures images of Waltzing Flowers and dancing Sugar Plum Fairies; it is amusing to realize that they were most certainly on the minds of Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington in 1960, a time when Ellington's band was setting attendance records at the Riviera Hotel.

Ellington had never before arranged another composer's work for performance with his band. Perhaps the searing desert heat led Ellington to seek out a wintry subject, and there can be little doubt that Strayhorn's classical roots prompted him to suggest Tchaikovsky's well-known and much-loved *Nutcracker Suite*. In any case, they plunged into their task with obvious delight, producing a saucy and colorful work that is simultaneously witty parody, affectionate tribute, and brilliant fantasy.

For maximum contrast (and maybe as a friendly "battle of the bands"), the RSO will play Tchaikovsky's original, followed by NIU Jazz Band playing the Ellington/Strayhorn version. Constraints of time limit us to three selections each.

Tchaikovsky's originals need no commentary. For the first selection, Ellington and Strayhorn retained the title, *Overture*, but adjective, *Miniature*. Nothing petite or diminutive about this: it's full-blown swing from beginning to end, featuring solos by saxophone, trombone and trumpet. In the last chorus the whole band joins in an exhilarating finale that would curl anybody's tutu.

Sugar Rum Cherry's punning title is surely a nod towards Las Vegas' ubiquitous bars and casinos. A drum figure leads to sultry solos on baritone and tenor saxes, backed up by wailing trumpets and trombone. At the end, the Sugar Plum Fairy is transformed into a West Indian beauty who dances off into the sugar cane fields.

Volga Vouty's title requires some explanation. "Vout" was a jive language invented by Los Angeles hipster, comedian, guitarist and cult figure Slim Gailliard (1916 – 1991), who influenced the speech of an entire generation of jazz musicians. The Ellington/Strayhorn version ignores both the brevity and breakneck tempo of Tchaikovsky's *Russian Dance*, stretching it into a swinging version that would inspire those leaping Cossacks to sit down, chill out, sip a cocktail and tap their toes.